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ABSTRACT

This paper relates the experiences of an English professor at Marshall University in West Virginia, transplanted from her northeastern home to Appalachia. The paper gives an overview of Marshall and its student and points out that most of the professor's education comes from listening to her students' and new acquaintances' stories. It notes that her students' experiences with educational systems are different from her own, and that some of her students in "Approaches to Teaching Literature" struggle because they cannot reconcile the idea of teaching a primary text from a pedagogical stance. According to the paper, the author/professor, in helping to develop the university's teacher education program, has learned that she needs to foster a means to have her students look at themselves and their literatures as culturally and artistically significant even before teaching pedagogy and methods. The paper states that future units will incorporate more Appalachian literature and heritage to allow students to celebrate their roots and dreams. (NKA)

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Teaching Literature Methods in Appalachia: Moving from Stereotypes to Authentic Engagement through Appalachian Language and Literature in the Classroom.

by Donna L. Pasternak

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Teaching Literature Methods in Appalachia

Marshall University hired me almost two years ago to help develop and teach content area methods and pedagogy classes as part of the English department's curriculum. What I've learned since arriving in western West Virginia is that these are not the same students I was teaching in suburban and urban New Jersey, and I cannot approach them as if they were.

Marshall University is a public university located in Huntington, West Virginia, a city bordering Ohio and Kentucky of approximately 50,000 people. It is the second largest city and the second largest university in West Virginia. Many of our 16,000 students are first generation college attendees who commute to school from their own or their parents' homes. They are fiercely loyal to family and its history. Many of these students are dramatically under prepared for college. Our graduation rate is a mere 35%. The ones who do graduate are dedicated students, driven to succeed in an area that offers few jobs and chances for advancement. The university is the largest employer in the county, and many of our graduates must leave West Virginia and their families to find lucrative employment. The only common worldly representation my students and their families find in the media often feature interviews with toothless and barely literate individuals living in mobile homes being taken advantage of by the coal industry - frequently with the tickling of banjo music in the background. Besides these depictions of Appalachia in news stories and feature articles, I am told when my students meet people on their vacations out of West Virginia their new acquaintances are fascinated by their

"wearing shoes" for the occasion. Despite these stereotypical "outsider" portrayals, Appalachian culture is not homogeneous but a diverse culture and society, in itself. But, these depictions cause many of my students to lack a sense of self as writers and readers, and, hence, as prospective teachers, because in undervaluing their own culture and literature they internalized these Appalachian stereotypes.

Much of my education in western West Virginia comes from listening to my students and new acquaintances' stories and, therefore, I will tell you some of these stories to highlight my education as a teacher in West Virginia. First, it never occurred to me that the education system I went through in Northern New Jersey and taught high school in in Central Pennsylvanian was not the same system the rest of the United States went through - it was only upon recently reading a student's scholarly resource evaluation of *Kay Vandergrift's Special Interest Page* that it was finally pinpointed for me that my public school experience, both as a student and a high school teacher, will never be her experience. For the purpose of this paper, let's call this student Mary. As many of you know, Vandergrift is a professor of Education at Rutgers, and, thus a voice within my sphere of education, but Mary points to many of her issues as false impressions that I assumed experiential to a teacher coming from and teaching in middle class America. Mary fights with Vandergrift for being a "pie in the sky" idealist who has never taught in a "real" world school system - a school system I also presumed to be the reality. Mary's points of contention reveal her sphere of education in West Virginia - a product of AP English classes and an "intellectualized" student, but a student who went through a rural, under-funded school system. Mary says of Vandergrift:

> . . . she [Vandergrift] speaks about public libraries as if every student always goes to them and they are convenient for everyone. It is harder for some students to

> get to them . . . I found these expectations a bit too high and unrealistic . . . Vandergrift emphasizes the link between the public library and schools. However, one thing she does not address at all is the factor of parental influence. If parents do not take children to the library, then they cannot go unless they are within walking distance. Sometimes families are not literate or do not value reading. In these cases, children do not have the option to use the library . . . In a perfect world, libraries and schools would be integrated and interdependent . . . This utopian state does not exist and will not, so why not try to fix what you have instead of dream the impossible? (XXXXX XXXX 1-3).

From Mary's experience, I perceive that in West Virginia libraries are not part of each school or that the public school and county systems are not integrated - a system assumed to be standard by both Vandergrift and me but labeled "utopian" by Mary. I asked Mary to address Vandergrift's philosophies and what it says about her own experiences and I'm awaiting her response. Moreover, I need to think of this perception in terms of my expectations with the integration of technology in these same school systems. Often, even if there are computers available in the public schools, the technology is so outdated the hardware cannot support the current software packages.

In addition to these different experiences regarding "infrastructure" norms, some of my students in Approaches to Teaching Literature class are struggling because they cannot reconcile the idea of teaching a primary text from a pedagogical stance. Many students merely want to teach their own version of the text from a teacher-centered classroom; a system they presume worked for the districts they are products of - a circumstance apparent from the next story.

At a recent West Virginia Department of Education meeting in Charleston, I was lucky to meet K-12 professionals from all over the state. One new colleague expressed her frustrations with her school system. Her disappointments involved the hiring of what she termed "qualified" personnel opposed to her school system's habit of filling vacancies through patronage positions to the "relatively" wealthy families from particular "hollows." She explained that often new hires in her school system come from these wealthier families, an already privileged class in the community. Many times these new hires had not performed to the highest expectations in college, since this was not a prerequisite to getting a teaching job in that school system. My colleague also expressed distress that many of these new hires already held the attitude that all the "dirty little ignorant hollow children" were uneducable - which, as we all know, is not necessarily the best stance from which to start educating someone, but this attitude does illustrate the undervaluing evident from the other stories.

This perception became particularly apparent to me the first time an entire literature class offhandedly remarked that I could discount someone's observations because that person was a "red neck." I asked the class how I should perceive this label in terms of a recent email I received from someone who had attended New York University with me. My friend wanted to know how I liked "teaching [my] red neck students." I asked the class, if they were the "red necks" to my friends in New York City, and to them the "red necks" were the people not attending Marshall who lived up the road in the trailer, then how do I place this label? iscover that I must sort out how to deal with a culture where everyone else is "the other," and this "other" is a derogatory acceptance of an outsider's view.

In helping to develop our teacher education program I've learned that I need to foster a means to have my students look at themselves and their literatures as culturally and artistically

significant even before teaching pedagogy and methods, and what I'd discovered by looking around the various departments is that this is already being done in many places on campus. In Eddy Pendarvis' classes, she teaches self-identity through poetry construction. In Dolores Johnson's linguistics' class, she teaches identity through pride in the diversity of the Appalachian language. In Shirley Lumpkin's classroom, she celebrates the diversity evident in Appalachian culture, experience and history by examining its literature.

When I teach the Approaches to Teaching Literature class next year and when I teach Composition and Rhetoric for Teachers in the fall, I too will be incorporating more Appalachian literature and heritage in my units to allow my students to celebrate their roots and dreams. I discover that to know my students, I must also know where they are and from where they come to know where I can take them intellectually. To do this, I need to celebrate their culture with them and understand the complexities of their literature - even if this means teaching them to do this themselves.